

Curriculum Development for Access to Employability

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Introduction

The current Widening Participation agenda is focused on enabling 'non-traditional' students to gain access to Higher Education. Many universities have already been successful in attracting substantial numbers of these students and are now seeking to help them access appropriate employment on graduation – to develop their employability. This paper describes the introduction of a curriculum-integrated professional placement module and outlines its perceived benefits to non-traditional students^[1].

Employability and its development

The concept of employability (lifelong learning) has been defined broadly as comprising subject knowledge and understanding, key skills, personal attributes and knowledge of organisations (CVCP *et al*, 1998).

There is growing evidence that work placements provide many benefits, e.g.:

- develop key skills, personal attributes and knowledge of organisations (Little, 1998);
- strengthen the link between theory and practice, enhance academic achievement, and improve employment prospects on graduation (Harvey *et al*, 1998);
- may improve student retention and progression - a concern of many post-`92 `access` universities (Blackwell *et al*, 2001).

While sandwich placements are relatively common in science, computing, engineering and business courses and placements are mandatory in, for example, nursing, dietetics, physiotherapy, social work, and teaching, placements of any type are mostly unknown in other academic areas.

Curriculum embedding

Students from ethnic groups and skilled manual/partly skilled or unskilled backgrounds are known to be disadvantaged in the graduate labour market and need to access the benefits that can be gained from placements. To address this issue, the Centre for Academic Initiatives, established at what formerly the University of North London, began in 1997 to develop subject-related placement opportunities at `near graduate` level. This resulted in the *Work placement for professional experience* module. Now, all undergraduates

can take the assessed, accredited, advanced level (15 points) module as a block (minimum of 5 weeks) during the summer vacation or part-time during their final year. The module is assessed using a combination of written and oral communication assignments, learning journal, and employer comment. Almost 230 students went on placement in 2000-01.

It was decided to develop subject-contextualised placements as subject embedding is essential for the majority of 'non-traditional' students. These students need to work while learning and although this (mostly) generic work can develop some of the `work-ready` attributes sought by employers, it may be more useful for them to gain professional experience. 'Non-traditional' students also do not have time for (or often access to) the traditional undergraduate recreational, social and sporting activities which can develop some employability attributes and abilities. Additionally, students tend to identify strongly with their subject, with the staff teaching it and do not value activities that are not assessed. Employers also do not wish to see the subject content and rigour of degrees diluted with `skills` and `careers` modules (Industry and Education report, November 2001).

This approach is supported by work elsewhere. An analysis of the actions of Welsh Higher Education institutions (Harvey, 2002) states `there is a much clearer notion of the need to embed employability skills development in the curriculum and a general shift away from only providing stand-alone employability modules'.

Module development and operation

The development and introduction of the module into all subjects took more than 3 years to complete. It required representations to several internal committees, providing them with a rationale for placements, complete module description, examples of suitable placements, subject contextualisation and learning agreements, allocation of responsibilities, quality assurance processes, and so on. Finally, a generic version was agreed for customisation and validation in each discipline, thereby giving module `ownership` to the academic area. Some subjects validated the module rapidly; others took considerably longer.

Responsibility for the module is shared between the central Employability Unit – based in Academic Initiatives - and academic staff; each subject has a named member of staff who liaises with the Unit. Students register with the Unit and find their own placements, but the Unit is proactive in identifying and developing specific projects with employers which meet institutional aims and provide placement opportunities. The Employability Unit:

- publicises placements;
- operates student induction and debriefing sessions;
- offers individual advice to students;
- monitors placement progress;
- provides a `hotline` for problems;
- undertakes cross-institutional annual monitoring and quality enhancement;

- provides staff development on the assessment of presentations and learning journals, and the production of learning agreements.

Academic staff agree the level of placement work, assess student work and undertake annual quality monitoring of the module in their subject area.

Module outcomes

Research is underway (as part of a larger 3-year Graduate Employability (GEM) HEFCE-funded project) to investigate students' placement experiences. This longitudinal research is using a combination of structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, learning logs, and focus group discussions to explore *inter alia* students' expectations of placement, their on-placement experiences and placement outcomes; preparation and on-placement support are also being researched. The methodology developed will be embedded in the monitoring processes and used to quality enhance stakeholders' - students, employers and academics – experiences.

The research, with three student cohorts, is showing that students believe they have gained considerable benefits from even this brief placement experience. The major gains were given as: increased confidence (83%), enhanced communication skills (79%), a greater understanding of how organisations work (78%) and developing self-reflection (73%). Students also think that it has supported their academic work by improving research and evaluation skills (73%) and analytical and problem solving abilities (67%), increasing enthusiasm for their degree course (61%), and generating links for final year projects and dissertations (35%). Placements can also help with career decisions by making students more focused and career aware (77%) and have resulted in both part-time job offers, while students continue studying, and full-time employment on graduation.

These outcomes are particularly interesting when considered with emerging findings from the main GEM work that is investigating stakeholder perceptions of the employability of 'non-traditional' students. This is showing that when employers discuss the skills and attributes they are looking for in graduates they consistently refer to generalised, impressionistic aspects that centre on 'confidence' and 'self-presentation' as opposed to specific, job-related skills. Discussions with non-traditional students have, however, highlighted a lack of 'self-confidence' and 'self-awareness'.

It is also clear from student comments that placement has boosted self-confidence:

'I don't feel apprehensive about finding a job, and talking to clients. I don't feel nervous about that; I know exactly what to expect. I feel much more confident when I talk to barristers, solicitors and clients.'

(Law student)

'I have become confident enough to interact with people on a professional level in a friendly and confident manner.'

(Theatre Studies & Marketing student)

The development of confidence and self-awareness are implicit in other comments:

'The experiences I had during placement have made my will and determination to reach my goal even stronger... Completing the placement has given me the drive to continue - and I feel I have found my vocation.'
(Mathematical Sciences student)

According to students' comments it appears that several factors encountered during placements can influence this development such as:

- a sense of belonging/fitting in

'I got to know almost everyone, either through work-related tasks or lunch breaks, which raised my self-confidence.' (Marketing student)

- interaction with others

'I have definitely learned how to deal with people in the industry a lot better. I feel a lot more confident when talking to managers.'
(International Business & Marketing student)

- knowledge and understanding of the workplace

'I left the company knowing more about how a tour operator really works and feeling more confident about myself.' (Leisure & Tourism student)

- personal achievements

'The work I did has improved my confidence in my practical skills and I have realised that my skills are better than I thought.' (Biological Sciences student)

The scheme has gained strong endorsement from students:

'I've had many jobs in different areas over the years and can honestly say that this (the placement) was the first time I've actually looked forward to going to work in the mornings!'
(Food & Consumer Studies student)

'..I would suggest that this module should be a core (compulsory) module for every course because every student needs to know how to cope in the competitive world of work.'
(Computing & Business student)

Future actions

From the work to date it is very evident that the students themselves are enthusiastic about the placement experience and believe they have benefited from it by developing a rich variety of useful attributes and skills and, most importantly, self-confidence. Further research underway may throw additional light on the extent to which the placements enhance the employability of 'non-traditional' students and enable them to access graduate career opportunities more readily.

NOTES

[1] Edited version of an invited paper for the conference on *New patterns of learning in HE: Exploring issues from combining work placement and study*, City University, 20-21 June 2002

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Biographical note

Barabara Page, Ph.D (Lond) in Physical Inorganic Chemistry, is currently Head of the Employability Unit at London Metropolitan University, coordinating and supervising an accredited placements module and numerous projects - among others: volunteering; supporting ethnic minority businesses and `at risk` students; and special projects e.g. with Metropolitan Police and East London Business Association. Her expertise includes curriculum development of employability, student progress files and employability research. She was a pioneer of the accreditation of sandwich placements in post-92 institutions, and developed a unique, women-only engineering foundation course. Other posts have included Director: Enterprise in Higher Education; Programme Manager for two Government Office for London projects; and Programme Director for two HEFCE-funded projects: TLTP3 and Widening Participation. Latest paper: *Perceptions of the employability of non-traditional students* (ESECT conference, April 2003). [email: b.page@londonmet.ac.uk]